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## Scires a Pallade doctam: Arachne and Ovid

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*Scires a Pallade doctam: Arachne and  
Ovid*

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Reading the Arachne myth in the Metamorphoses may reveal Ovid's awareness about "the historical dimension of myth" (Burkert, Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual) and his conscious use of "mythical narratives" as a mirror to "contemporary life" (Griffin, Latin Poets and Roman Life). Ovid creates an implicit bond between myth and reality: the story of Arachne resonates with a sense of alienation that rings true to Ovid's own apparent experience. While autobiographical elements in poetry are always problematic, if not impossible, to adumbrate, and should perhaps be subordinated to the "internal necessities" of the poetry (Veyne, Roman Erotic Elegy: Love, Poetry, and the West), the accepted historical evidence points to an obvious schism between Ovid's poetic themes and the social and moralistic legislation of Augustus. This tension between Ovidian art and Augustan propaganda is symbolized in the *certamen* of Arachne and Minerva.

Arachne's plebeian origins (*de plebe*, VI.10), her skillfulness (*opus admirabile*, VI.14), and audacity (*temeraria*, VI.32) bring her to challenge Minerva (*cur haec certamina vitat?* VI.42) in a *femineus labor*, a craft of

particular association with Roman women (Giardina, The Romans). The goddess can brook no insolence to her power (*numina nec sperni sine poena nostra sinamus*, VI.4), her expertise (*tanta...magistra*, VI.24), or her potential beneficence (*supplice voce roga: veniam dabit illa roganti*, VI.33). The ensuing contest and its outcome illustrate the gulf between the residents of Olympus and the mortals of Earth, or in Ovid's view the dwellers on the Palatine and the ordinary citizens of Rome (*hic locus est, quem, si verbis audacia detur/haud timeam magni dixisse Palatia caeli*, I.175-176).

The figures of Minerva's tapestry, glorifying the imperial power of divinity, are pictures of *Romanitas* (*augusta gravitate sedent*, VI.73). The rigid didacticism of Minerva's work echoes the Augustan classicism current in Rome (Anderson, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Books 6-10). In strong contrast to such propaganda are the images of Arachne's tapestry, illuminating the passionate duplicity of the gods with the Ovidian word play on *ludere*, 'to mock and deceive' or 'to make love' (*elusam...Europam...luserit...luserit*, VI.103f). The depictions on Arachne's tapestry reflect the very elements of Ovid's own storytelling in the first part of the Metamorphoses (Bömer,

P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen: Kommentar): divine love affairs verbally woven into one another; helpless women seduced by powerful, passionate and deceitful gods.

The final judgment of Arachne's work reveals no flaw, but the weaver chooses suicide before the wrath of Minerva, foreshadowing an increasingly frequent imperial Roman solution to political problems. Propaganda, whether Olympian or Palatine, must replace the truth of the artist's vision. Minerva's punishment expels Arachne from human society with a metamorphosis that becomes "lex" for Arachne and her progeny (VI.137f). The metamorphosis of Arachne becomes a prophetic warning of Ovid's own expulsion from Roman society and exile to the Black Sea at the hands of Augustus. The contest between art and state appears no contest at all.